



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

The Characteristics of Intentional,
Mature, Make-Believe Play:
How Play Influences Development

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QUESTIONS FROM OCTOBER 22ND FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

Q:

At what age would you start working towards mature play? Is there a continuum that we should be aware of?

A:

Yes, children reach this stage of mature play around 4 and 5. And unfortunately, at 5, they're in the glorious heyday of that. We were talking about this before the seminar began, how sad it is that kindergarten has pretty much gotten rid of play. But it's really around 4. In mixed-age classrooms, you can get 3-year-olds involved in mature play, and I think that's the glory of mixed-age classrooms. I actually have a funny story. I was in a classroom, and they had turned the entire classroom into an airport. You had to get a passport to walk in. This is a classroom where $\frac{3}{4}$ th of the children came from immigrant families. So actually they knew a tremendous amount about airports, more than the teachers did.

The teacher commented that the biggest problem with 3-year-olds participating in this is that they had to take their shoes off to get through security. A lot of children went home with their shoes on the wrong foot because they would keep taking them on and off and put them in the security bin. They would push it through a box, it would come out the other end, and they would have to get their shoes on to get on the airplane.

So [3-year-olds] are able to participate in play if there's a mature player. A mature player, like a 4-year-old, would become the play mentor and they can play along. In fact, we've had children with special needs that hardly have any language at all. You can give them a role where they're central to the play but they don't have to talk a lot. So our favorite role for children with low levels of language is the cashier, because the cashier just says the same thing over and over again. "Where's the money, here's your credit card." So you can incorporate children at all different levels into play.

Q:

That's a great example of thinking about roles that children with special needs can play as well, so they don't have to be separated off, doing something completely different. They can be included in this type of mature play with just a little bit of thinking on the teacher's part, in terms of what would be an appropriate role for them to be able to do independently.

A:

When we have children with special needs, we also try to have a sensory layer. Each center can have a sensory layer, for example especially towards the end of the year, because their play doesn't really grow quite as quickly as the play of the more mature children. For example, in the restaurant, we would have dishwashing, because they often like the sensory feel of washing water. So we'd have a little tub with dishes, not very much water. Just enough so that it feels wet. And the children who have special needs can actually be part of the restaurant play by being the cashier or the dishwasher. They can then become incorporated, and the other children will start having them play with them. They'll give them something to do that ties into the rest of the play. The teacher has to work on the role but also the sensory needs of that child. The third thing is scaffolding the playing mentor with what you say, because the play mentor may ask the other child to do something they don't quite understand.

Q:

What is the organization of adults during play? Do they spread themselves out, do they think about ahead of time where they're going to be to support the play?

A:

This really, I think, changes the way you organize your classroom. Oftentimes when children are involved in this play, one of the teachers is actually doing maintenance kind of things, like preparing snacks and washing the tables. And at the beginning of the year, it has to be all hands on deck or else you won't get play going. What we try to really encourage people to do is to think about it as a stage kind of thing, especially at the beginning of the year. All hands on deck, everybody gets that play going. Once the play becomes mature, you're just checking on the scenarios, making sure they're rich, taking kids on field trips. Because they can take anything and turn it into play once they become mature players.

You have to invest the staff time at the beginning to make sure that play really gets up and going. One example of this, it's one of my most favorite examples: I was in this classroom and a little girl has a beautiful pink boa, and a little boy has a tie. They're walking to the play center, the housekeeping center. He opens the door of the refrigerator and she looks in, she stands up, and he closes it. Then he opens the door of the stove, the oven door. And she looks inside. The teacher and I are standing there, and she's saying, "Oh, I have such mature play in my classes," and we're both watching this. You see, that's not very mature play, because they're not talking that much to each other, and they seem to be kind of like exploring the furniture. And she said, "Well, wait a second, I'll ask him what he's doing." She went over and said, "So what are you doing?" And he says, "I'm showing the apartment." It turned out that he was homeless, and that weekend, he had gotten his very first house, very first place to live. The mother said that he had become so self-regulated, she took him with her. She said his brothers and sisters at that age, she would never have taken them, but because he was so regulated now after being in Tools, she took him.

She said that the apartment manager said he was going to be an apartment manager when he grew up. He would ask [the apartment manager] what she would say—he was memorizing it. And then he came back and relived one of the greatest moments of his life. The gift of play is not just self-regulation and all this other stuff. Once they become mature players, they can turn any piece of their life into something to be relived. Didn't you relive the glories of your birthday party or whatever?

Q:

Right.

A:

Over and over again.

Q:

What about children who want to develop a play plan around superhero play or even more fantasy-based play? Is that something that could also turn into mature play? Or is that something that you would scaffold them towards more of a different scenario?

A:

I think that they do the superhero play because they don't have any other scenarios. They don't know how to be the Home Depot guy. They've never been to Home Depot with their parents. So I think that a lot of the aggressive kinds of scenarios that they build are because they have nothing else. And you have to work pretty hard at getting that scenario to be something they can live. We do things like, show videos. We even have trouble in our classroom getting home play going, because children don't know very much. So at the beginning of the year in the Tools classroom, we turn each center into a room of the house. We have the kitchen and then we have a living room. Most teachers take a big cardboard box and they cut it out so somebody can play being on TV. And the other children play being the TV watchers. It's one of the most popular centers, because they know a lot about television.

We have a bathroom and washing area, where they wash their clothes. In urban areas, they turn that into the Laundromat instead of a room in the house, which is just fine. You actually have to teach them what goes on. We ask parents to make sure their child watches you cook, even if it's putting the food into the microwave and turning it on. We wallpaper the center with pictures from that child's family doing those things, just normal, everyday things. But you'd be surprised. You have to build the scenario so that they understand what goes on in those areas.

That's one of the more difficult things, for them to know enough about stuff so that they can play it.

Q:

If you were going to give kind of a percentage that you would ideally like to see children having time to engage in this type of mature play, is it all day, does it last about an hour and that's good, or what would you say?

A:

I'd say 40 minutes, although at the beginning of the year, if you get 20 minutes where they're actually playing a role, you're doing really well. By the end of the year, most of our kids could play 40 minutes. And then we have about a 50-minute, 40- to 60-minute play time of this kind of play. We have other times when children engage in free play, and we leave the same things out so that we encourage them. By the end of the year, they'll just bring out the same old things they were doing during this more concentrated play time. So that you actually end up with more play time. We also take some of the elements out on the playground, because we find that there's a lot of aggressive play that gets started outside, because they really have no idea what to play.

I think giving children something to play is one of our biggest tasks as teachers. When you take children to the grocery store, (I don't know how many people can do field trips anymore, but I know in Head Start, you still do), we interview every single person and ask them to tell us what they do. If you go to a restaurant, usually they don't talk about what they're doing. So, the McDonald's person will say, "I'm the person who takes your order. I have to ask you what you would like. I put that in this machine here. You say you want a hamburger, I push this button. And then I ask you for your money." So you actually have the person demonstrate what they say and do, each person.

Because these are the people that the children are going to play. The teacher will reiterate it by saying, "You see, he's the person who takes your order. He asks you this, and then he does this," blah, blah, blah. And you actually also have to play the customer. Because they don't really know what the customer is doing. Getting that background knowledge up and using field trips is really important.

Q:

Our time has come to an end. Dr. Leong rearranged her schedule to do this at the last minute, and I just want to say how much we appreciate that. Thank you, listeners. We'll see you next month at the Front Porch again.



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